

# Teaching Philosophy

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My approach to teaching since my first position as a peer tutor in Grade 11 has been guided mainly by three simple principles: 1) Students deserve the best instruction possible, 2) there is always room for improvement, and 3) any experience can serve as the inspiration or catalyst for improvement. Being a student for most of my life has provided many opportunities to observe teachers and professors who either exemplify the preceding beliefs or, conversely, represent philosophies and practices to avoid as an instructor. I have tried to apply the lessons learned from such models in my various teaching capacities which, in turn, have further helped me develop my teaching style.

My approach is also informed by research conducted on my own and while completing my teaching certificate. Given the nature of my field of study and clinical practice, I have been most interested in the various psychological factors that influence students' potential for academic success, particularly their motivation. I accordingly strive to optimize their motivation through several means. First, I make it clear how much I love my dual careers in teaching and clinical psychology, trying to leave no doubt that I want to be in that classroom and that I want them to feel the same way. Second, from the beginning I explicitly state my intentions as an instructor, namely my commitment to providing the best education possible and to instilling in students certain skills that are relevant to various areas of functioning beyond the classroom. I explain that my commitment extends to accountability as well, in that ultimately I am there to serve the students. This latter statement may seem clichéd, but the feedback from my students, including those who were kind enough to provide letters of support for my nomination, suggest that they do appreciate seeing their instructor make such outright acknowledgments. More important, they appreciate seeing me endeavour to back up my stated intentions through my actions and attitude during the term. I believe they accurately perceive such attempts as a demonstration of my respect for students, which I further try to convey by emphasizing that each of them is a valued individual who has the capacity to contribute something unique to the class.

Communicating respect is the third way I try to motivate students. In fact, I soon discovered a discouraging fact regarding how some Ryerson students view themselves and the university, as reflected in comments such as "Why are his standards so high? Doesn't he know this is only Ryerson? We're not U of T or York." I make it very clear from the first day of class that I rank Ryerson, as well as my department and colleagues, on a par with those other universities, both of which I have attended and worked at. I accordingly respect my students enough to believe they deserve to be communicated with in a manner commensurate with their abilities and experiences, be they associated with academia or any other areas of life such as their careers, family, and so on. In other words, I let my students know that I believe they have the ability to learn at a level consistent with my high expectations.

Returning to my previous point about being accountable to students, I explain that I will do my part to help them perform up to their potential, so that they can succeed in my demanding courses. It was extremely gratifying and humbling to see the accompanying letters of support from students, which indicate that they appreciate and benefit from my efforts to accomplish this goal. In addition to welcoming my attempts to bring an innovative and engaging approach to class, students apparently are grateful for my commitment to being as available to them as possible through e-mail and "Instant Messaging." Although making myself so available increases the possibility that students may rely on me too much or overwhelm me with their requests for assistance, such has not been the case. This is likely due in part to my aforementioned emphasis on how capable I believe everyone has the potential to be and how I expect them to try to work to that level. That is, I try to encourage students to develop an inner locus of control: a sense of personal responsibility for their choices, actions and outcomes. In light of my assurances of accountability, together with the effort I put into all other aspects of the course, students do know that I am always happy to provide extra guidance or assistance when necessary, as long as they do their part.

One potential concern regarding my philosophy and teaching approach would be if students mistakenly believed that my devotion to helping them was driven by insecurity, lack of confidence, or a "need to be liked." Or, students could misinterpret my spontaneous, light-hearted, approachable and interactive style as a lack of respect or seriousness toward my profession. Such misattributions would counteract my attempts to inspire students to succeed, as they would likely not be compelled by dubious motives or hypocritical urgings to "do as I say, not as I do."

Fortunately, the abovementioned letters of support, along with Course Evaluations from each term, indicate that students recognize the competence, confidence, professionalism, and expertise I bring to my courses. Realizing that my efforts are not fuelled by insecurity, they should sense that my motives are sincere; as described in those letters of support, students do appear to understand that the "special touches" I add to my classes serve only one purpose: to benefit students. It is my hope that seeing me invest so much time and energy into my courses due to my love of teaching, dedication to my field, high standards, and desire for them to succeed, will inspire students to exert themselves and capitalize on the opportunities available to them at Ryerson.

I am aware that all of my best intentions and strongest encouragement to succeed will mean little if students are not motivated to attend class. To this end, I always challenge myself to present information that students will not likely encounter elsewhere. Given the subject matter of most of my courses, I also try to help them see how the lessons learned in class can relate to many different aspects of their lives. Once again, I am encouraged to see from my students' letters of support that they appreciate these and other teaching objectives I set for myself. Such positive feedback suggests that I am on the right track with respect to my philosophy of teaching, intentions, beliefs about students' needs, and execution of my duties at Ryerson.

Nevertheless, as stated above, there is always room for improvement. I thus deeply value feedback from my students during class, through evaluations, and elsewhere. I also spend considerable time reviewing my lessons and investigating and experimenting with different ways to achieve my teaching goals. Maintaining this perspective enables me to continue to uphold the ideals of my profession and to try to provide my students with learning experiences as valuable as they deserve.